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NEW YORK TIMES
24 April, 1985

Weinberger Said to Back Press Despite Test

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, April 23 — Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger is still committed to letting reporters cover secret military operations from their outset, despite what officials described as a breach of secrecy in a test Sunday, a Pentagon spokesman said today.

"The Secretary believes that the press should be able to cover military operations," said his spokesman, Michael I. Burch. "This was a test, and we want to try again."

But Maj. Gen. Winant Sidle, retired, who led a Pentagon-appointed commission that devised ground rules for news coverage of military operations, said the experiment Sunday raised doubts about whether reporters should be admitted during the first hours of a secret military operation.

The general also suggested that press coverage in the early stages of a sensitive operation be strictly limited to reporters the Pentagon has decided are "100 percent reliable."

A Test in Honduras

The experiment Sunday, in which a representative "pool" of reporters was flown to Honduras to cover a scheduled military exercise, was the first test of arrangements proposed by General

Sidle's commission in August. The commission was formed in response to press complaints about being excluded in the first days of the Grenada invasion in 1983.

Under a pool arrangement, reporters covering a story are obliged to share their findings with colleagues who are not included.

Word of the operation Sunday soon spread to news organizations not included on the trip and, after numerous inquiries, the Pentagon decided late Sunday to talk freely about the exercise.

General Sidle, who served as chief of information for the Military Assistance

Command in Vietnam, said he was disappointed about the breach of secrecy but felt the system should be tested again. "I'm a little surprised that we've forgotten how to do this," he said, "but apparently we have."

He added, "I want to see it tried a couple more times before I say it can't work."

General Sidle talked with reporters at the Pentagon today after addressing a tribute to war correspondents on the 40th anniversary of the death of Ernie Pyle, the World War II reporter.

Says Doubts Were Raised

The general said the episode Sunday raised doubts about the trustworthiness of the press and would increase resistance by military officers to press coverage of combat.

After this experience, he said, "the commanders in the field are going to say, 'Well, wait a minute now, can we trust these guys?'"

General Sidle said the Pentagon should consider "a fallback" that would bar a reporting pool from the battle zone until after the initial landing. "Wait until the guys are ashore," he said. "You miss H-hour, but you don't miss D-Day."

He also suggested that the Pentagon be given veto power over which reporters are invited and that it consider mustering a pool of reporters without notifying the reporters' employers, in an effort to avoid leaks.

In the exercise Sunday, the Pentagon notified 10 Washington bureau chiefs, who were free to choose reporters.

Many of the press inquiries about the supposedly secret operation came after the news director at the Mutual Broad-

casting System, which sent a reporter on the pool, called other radio outlets to advise them to make technical arrangements for receiving telephone reports from the pool.

Mr. Burch, who is Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs, spent most of an hourlong news conference today fielding questions about who was to blame for the breach of secrecy and whether it proved reporters could not be trusted in an actual military mission.

"Our preliminary reports," he said, "show that the leaks occurred among news bureaus here in Washington soon after the initial notification."